Expanding our literacy repertoires: Using Film in Senior English Classrooms in Queensland

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Prior to the updating of the Senior syllabus in English in 2002, films were mostly deployed in English as review material. This is because the old syllabus was largely 'generic', and focused on the primarily structural reproduction of genres, with the 'critical literacy' element taking the form of the student writer as 'critic'. This hardly makes sense anymore, as review genres (both of current and older films) are so common and easy to obtain and read via electronic and print sources. Responding to film in the form of a film review can be a fairly mimetic, structural exercise for students with little grasp on filmic languages. With the new English syllabus' infusion of Cultural Studies and contemporary literary and linguistic theories, the study of film can be much more exciting and conducive to students becoming more cineliterate. This article explores some useful approaches to selected films which can be used in the Senior English classroom in Queensland.

The framework 2002 English Syllabus comprises three linguistic dimensions which underpin the study of texts; the cultural (generic texts in contexts); the textual (surface or operational features of texts); the critical (discourses, power; identities in texts). The introduction of the 'critical' strand into the theoretical framework allows students to detect underpinning ideologies, textual gaps and silences, and gain knowledge of the 'constructedness' of texts and reading/viewing positions.
This critical dimension has the potential to transform the erstwhile film/book or film/play comparisons from traditional written analytical texts (essays and reviews) to more integrated multimodal and multimedia responses. The syllabus still requires 'mandatory' written categories such as:

- an analytical exposition in response to literature, e.g. an analysis of how Australian identities are constructed through selections of poetry; a critical comparison of the ways the viewer has been positioned in two film versions of a play or novel that has been studied (for instance comparing the Zefferelli and Luhrman versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Radiance* the play with *Radiance* the film).
- one imaginative text, e.g. short story, drama script, interior monologue, epistolatory narrative.

- one persuasive/reflective text suitable for a public audience, e.g. feature article, profile, or column; obituary; interview; biography; review.

All tasks should be carefully contextualized in terms of purpose and audience. (Adapted from QBSSS, 2002, p.30.)
We have the added advantage in Queensland of not having to 'write' for an external examination (apart form the Queensland Core Skills test, which is separately 'ranked' state wide). Assessment is cumulative and school based, and state moderated, which allows for a great deal of scope and flexibility for assessment possibilities. If we assume these 'written' categories can be 'shaped' (to borrow a term from the junior Queensland syllabus) as well as 'written', and we take an intertextual approach which involves filmic resources as primary texts, the possible responses are exciting and wide ranging. The old book/film comparison in the form of an analytical essay assumes an academic audience, probably of one—the teacher. Whilst we might recognize that media audiences might also be reduced to 'one' viewer in front of a PC watching downloaded DVs, mediated responses have the potential to appeal to a larger audience than just the teacher reading the 'traditional' essay. An entire class, for instance might learn from a student devised persuasive speech, assisted by a multimedia slide show, comparing various news items around a single issue, *à la* the ABC's *Mediawatch.* Furthermore the textual, cultural and critical analysis that students engage in, to study filmic or televisual languages within selected media texts, prepares the same student or student group to reshape, produce or design alternative media texts, rather than to merely respond in traditional written forms in print modes. Engaging in conversations about filmic texts via chat rooms and the Internet, either within a class or across schools, the country or internationally, may be possible, so that critique becomes dialogic, inviting exploration of a wider repertoire of reading positions. How differently, for instance, would rural and urban students view *Cunamulla* (Dennis O 'Rourke, 2001)?

A film forum via a chat room between schools might allow such reading positions to be compared and contrasted and perhaps compiled and later electronically 'published'. The SBS program, *The Movie Show*, provides excellent examples of how the viewer's gender might influence different readings of a filmic text, as Margaret and David discuss their respective readings of the same text in the form of oral (albeit mediated) reviews. Boys' and girls' responses may be compared over groups in different cultural contexts via electronic message boards.

Films derived from books and plays have been studied in the English curriculum for some time. The 2002 syllabus suggests, for instance comparing Jane Austen's novel *Emma* and the film *Clueless* (Amy

Heckerling, 1995), or Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice,* or Simon Langton's 1995 film of the same name, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon McGuire, 2001) (QBSSS, 2002, p. 15). We might add to that a comparison of the bard's *Taming of the Shrew* with the rather crass teen film *Ten Things I hate about You* (Gil Junger, 1999). How does the contemporising of the original source text change the impact of the narrative and of course the language, in the transformation of theatrical poetry to teen-screenplay crudity? In a fit of daring, and with parental permission, I once had senior students comparatively review Ray Lawlor's *Bliss* (1987) with Peter Carey's novel. In the new syllabus however, these can be studied not just for 'reviewing' but for identifying how readers and viewers are invited to respond differently to and make different readings of situation and character. The filmed versions of *Henry V* (1989)and *Much Ado about Nothing* (1993), both directed by and starring Kenneth Brannagh, stay closer to the original text, but certainly bring to life the words on the page and offer a way into Shakespeare, which has to be better than a tired 'reading around the class strategy'.

Even if the entire five act Shakespearean plays are not studied, oratorical excerpts from *Henry V* battle scenes might be compared with televized speeches by politicians, to examine features of oral rhetoric, such as Howard's 'we're off to war in Iraq' speech. These are useful texts to prepare students for mandatory spoken/signed categories of the exit folio. Additionally, an intertextual comparison might focus on specific scenes, such as the meeting of the 'star crossed lovers' in the two versions of *Romeo and Juliet* (Luhrmann, 1996 & Zefferelli, 1986). Students may examine how sequences are constructed by camera angle, shot type, lighting, soundtrack, editing and other specifically filmic techniques. This moves the viewing of films out of the 'reader response' and 'generic' approaches to film and literature, and into more thorough investigations of 'languages' particular to film, which are familiar to Senior Film and TV students who engage in both design and production of films, as well as their critique. There is no reason then, after such close investigation of filmic languages, why English students cannot produce design concepts, including short film scripts or script alternative scenes, which challenge mainstream film narratives or representations. Lack of production equipment in schools may preclude actually producing the concepts, but this also means that the concepts can be quite elaborate, as they will remain at the pre-production level of design. A printed review cannot do this critical and innovative work. The hope is that by encouraging more critical reading of film and creating a deeper understanding of how we 'read' filmic texts, young viewers may become more discerning about the films they choose to support at the box office. I am always intrigued by the Australian audience's lack of support for this small but amazingly innovative industry. Consequently I shamelessly plug the Australian film industry in my

classes with pre-service teachers and hope they pass on this enthusiasm to their students in schools.

Australian students need to be encouraged to see Australian films, to overcome the cultural cringe and to deconstruct mainstream action fodder, which comprises their largely formulaic American menu of films. Films such as *Crackerjack* (Paul Maloney, 2002), *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), *The Dish* (Rob Sitch, 2001) or *The Games* (John Clarke & Ross Stevenson, ABC Video, 1998) provide excellent material for debunking stereotypes in terms of national identity. These films will assist students to examine particular Australian discourses such as sport, 'mateship', and the 'underdog', and to identify how these discourses fit with students' own values, cultural assumptions and attitudes.

In the Australian and New Zealand canon, we also have individual stories of 'coming of age' and cultural identity, such as *Yolngu Boy (Stephen Johnson, 2001), Australian Rules (Paul Goldman, 2002)* and *Whale Rider (Nicky Caro, 2003).* Australian Rules in particular might be examined in conjunction with other texts which deal with race relations, such as the American teen film *Save the Last Dance* (Thomas Carter, 2001), or *Russian Doll* (Stavros Kazantzidis, 2001) or the recent Australian feature, *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003). Contemporary Australian film is also rich in material that investigates discourses of cultural identity and power, which foreground diverse cultures and Indigenous characters, previously misrepresented or marginalized in mainstream films, such as the features: *Floating Life* (Clara Law, 2000), *The Goddess of 1967* (Clara Law 2001), *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1999, based on Louis Nowra's play), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002, based on the book by Doris Pilkington Garimara), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer) or the documentary *Shifting Shelter* (Ivan Sen). All these films also provide platforms from which to derive spoken texts, which students must produce as part of their exit level folio work. Most of these films also have study guides, written by ATOM members, which accompany subscription copies of *Australian Screen Education.* Students can respond orally to these texts by creating panel discussions, formal debates, imaginative storytelling, dramatic recreation and monologues, focusing on discourses of identity, racism, postcolonialism, families, cultural difference and diversity and chapters of our history, such as the stolen generation. Some 'spoken' categories, listed in the Syllabus are clearly inappropriate for these texts, such as a 'eulogy' in the persona of character. If the character was Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander they may be breaking a taboo in speaking a dead person's name. Teachers choosing these texts, therefore, would need to be culturally sensitive in the options for assessment offered to students, particularly in regional areas of Queensland where a high proportion of students may be Indigenous.

The new wave of wonderful films featuring Indigenous characters and stories extend and challenge the repertoire of largely stereotypical characters, representations and narratives of the earlier Australian film canon. There may still be a place for a *contextualized* examination of Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and the film of the same name, if they are 'counter-taught' through the lens of postcolonial discourses and discussed in terms of dispossession discourses. *Black and White* (Craig Lahiff, 2002) is a powerful feature which explores racial disempowerment and invites investigations into the language of the legal system as a marginalizing discourse. I used to use the SBS screened documentary *Broken English*, which explored the trial of Rupert Max Stewart in relation to the canonical novel, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird.* Now that the story has become a feature film (*Black and White*) it is more accessible to English teachers.

A number of recent films offer much more than reviewing as a possible response for study in an English classroom. The writing process itself can be investigated in texts which explore innovative techniques of narrative, such as *Adaptation,* (Spike Jonze, 2002). This film blurs truth and fiction, genre and character boundaries and critiques Hollywood writing conventions, whilst providing a meta-narrative about the screenwriting process, through the characters of the screenwriting brothers. This film, which has been adapted by Charlie Kaufman from on an offbeat book, *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean, turns in on itself and could provide exciting discussion and analysis of writing processes, along with aspects of the transformation from print to filmic texts through exposing and deploying tricks of screenplay convention. Similar narrative and character conventions have been challenged in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) based on the source novel by Michael Cunningham, which, intertextually, draws from an original story by Virginia Woolf and involves her as a character. Such fascinating intertextual material probably lends itself more appropriately to the subject Extension English, although aspects of the novel could be accessed by mainstream Senior English students.

There are many films suitable for the secondary viewing context, which provide excellent models for imaginative experiments in the students' own writing or production of multimodal texts. Extending students' textual literacy practices via encouraging them to read, view and recreate 'transformations', allows investigations into how texts are socially 'constructed' to invite particular meanings. This may take the form of 'altering the turning point in a narrative to explore the effects of different choices' (QBSSS, 2002, p.15). An edited version of *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999*)* would probably need parental permission to screen at school, due to the sex and drug content, but *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1999) similarly offers alternative endings and therefore model transformations for students' own writing. Such films promote critical literacy, and can encourage students to experiment with their own imaginative writing, speaking and shaping, and to challenge the

more conventional storylines of mainstream films, which are too many to name individually here. At the risk of being accused of further shameless plugging of an exploitative multinational slogan—let's just do it!

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